

For Immediate Release
July 29, 2005

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Coalition formed to highlight Indiana's Underground Railroad History

INDIANAPOLIS – The Underground Railroad wasn't a railroad, and it wasn't underground. It was a network of paths and roads to safe houses leading fugitive slaves to freedom, not just in Canada, but also throughout the United States and Mexico. There were multiple routes through Indiana leading slaves to freedom.

Representatives from 17 Indiana counties have formed the Indiana Underground Railroad Coalition to draw attention to Indiana's role in the Underground Railroad, and to develop exhibits and tours highlighting Indiana's connection to the Underground Railroad. The coalition is made up of representatives from Clark, Decatur, Dearborn, Floyd, Franklin, Harrison, Jackson, Jefferson, Jennings, Ohio, Ripley, Rush, Scott, Switzerland, Union, Washington and Wayne counties.

"We determined that these 17 counties had verifiable railroad history and that we would begin there. Eventually we hope to extend the project throughout the state," said Orloff Miller, project curator.

The coalition began by identifying three gateway sites in Indiana's Underground Railroad history. They include the Carnegie Center for Art and History in New Albany, Historic Eleutherian College in Lancaster, and the Levi and Catharine Coffin House in Fountain City. Then each of the 17 counties was asked to submit three of its documented Underground Railroad stories.

"Hoosiers have never forgotten all those companies of Indiana boys who fought and died in the Civil War, but the abolitionists and Underground Railroad activity preceding the War remain under-represented in the stories we tell about our own history," said Miller. "This project brings together the stories of forgotten individuals from 17 counties. Our biggest challenge has not been identifying the people, places, and events; it has been deciding which stories to tell."

Once the coalition has identified and collected the counties' stories, they will then be used to help illustrate various themes in exhibits that will be developed at each of the three gateways. Driving tours of Indiana's Underground Railroad sites and overnight packages with the Indiana Bed and Breakfast Association also will be developed as a part of this project.

The coalition received a Quality of Place Initiative grant for \$89,000 in November 2004 from the Indiana Department of Commerce to begin work on the project. The first phase of the project, including resource collection, exhibit plans and tour development, will be completed by November 30, 2005.

For more information about the project, contact Jeannie Regan-Dinius with the Indiana Underground Railroad Initiative administered through the Indiana Department of Natural Resources' Division of Historic Preservation and Archaeology at 317/232-1646 or jrdinius@dnr.in.gov.

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